

China-India Border Tensions at Doka La

August 9, 2017

Recent border tensions between India and China may be indicative of a new phase of heightened Sino-Indian rivalry. This rivalry is manifesting itself not only along the two nations' 2,167-mile-long disputed Himalayan border, but also throughout South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean littoral region. Intensified frictions raise the potential for open conflict and could serve as an impetus for further U.S.-India strategic cooperation that could have implications for China. An issue for Congress is whether to call on the Administration to put forth a strategy and report on this strategic development.

The Situation at Doka La

[Border tensions between China and India](#) escalated in mid-June 2017 as China extended an unpaved road on the Doka La Plateau on the disputed border between China and Bhutan, high in the Himalayas. Chinese road-building activity was first revealed by a Royal Bhutan Army Patrol that sought to dissuade the Chinese from continuing. Indian military personnel subsequently moved to the border area.

[Doka La is located](#) in territory disputed by Bhutan and China to the north of the Siliguri Corridor (see **Figure 1**). The corridor, also known as the “chicken’s neck,” links central India with its seven northeastern states. It is approximately 20 miles wide at its narrowest part. Chinese control of the corridor would isolate 45 million Indians in an area the size of the United Kingdom.

Figure I. China, India, Bhutan Border Area

Source: Congressional Research Service.

Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with China but does have a “special” relationship with India based on a [1949 Treaty of Friendship](#), which gives India a guiding influence over Bhutan’s defense and foreign affairs. The treaty was revised in 2007 to give Bhutan a greater level of autonomy. With a population of less than 1 million, Bhutan is dwarfed by India (1.3 billion) and China (1.4 billion).

The Doka La [border tensions mounted while Prime Minister Modi traveled to Washington, DC](#), to meet with President Trump. China may have been motivated to signal displeasure over developing ties between India and the United States.

History of Border Tensions

China and India fought a month-long border war in late 1962. The conflict occurred days after the Cuban missile crisis occupied the United States. The war was a [humiliating defeat for India and left Indian leaders with a deep sense of betrayal by China](#). The war followed a 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule that sent Tibet’s spiritual leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, into exile in India, strengthening China’s perception of a threat by India to its rule in Tibet. Following the border war, China retained control over an extensive area in the western sector of the border (known as Aksai Chin), which previously was Indian territory. China also claims large swaths of territory in the border’s eastern sector in Arunachal Pradesh, and does not recognize the 1914 McMahon Line that British and Tibetan authorities recognized as the border between India and Tibet, and that a newly independent India recognized in 1947.

Over time, the buffer states that historically helped separate India and China have come under pressure as Chinese and Indian power has expanded into the region. In geopolitical terms Bhutan, like Nepal, can be viewed as a buffer state between India and China. Tibet, over which the Chinese Communist Party gained control in 1951, and [Sikkim, annexed by India in 1975](#), also acted as buffers between the two great

powers of Asia. China recognized India's annexation of Sikkim in 2003, but the situation at Doka La could potentially lead to a [shift in China's position on Sikkim](#) and to increased efforts by China to develop its influence in Bhutan.

[Beijing views Arunachal Pradesh as disputed territory](#) between China and India, calling the territory South Tibet, and China objected to a visit to the border by the Dalai Lama in April 2017. The People's Liberation Army held [live fire drills](#) close to the border with Arunachal Pradesh in July 2017. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said China was "firmly opposed" to then-U.S. [Ambassador to India Richard Verma's visit to Arunachal Pradesh](#) in October 2016 and urged the United States to stop getting involved.

Policy Responses

The [Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#) stated that "India is deeply concerned" about the developments at Doka La and that India and Bhutan "have been in continuous contact." Some Indian strategists have argued for a more comprehensive [response by India to China's "strategic incursions."](#) According to some analysts, an [overall improved Indian military posture](#) along the frontier with China may be boosting Indian resolve in dealing with China over Doka La.

[China has stated that "India should immediately and unconditionally withdraw](#) its trespassing border troops back to the Indian side of the boundary" as "a prerequisite and basis for resolving the incident."

The United States has not played a significant role in the dispute. The July 2017 trilateral [Malabar Naval Exercise](#), which included India, the United States, and Japan, as well as the U.S.-India [Defense Logistics Agreement](#), pointed for some to a developing strategic relationship between India and the United States. Still, some analysts in the United States have wondered [why the United States has "said precious little"](#) with regard to Doka La given perceptions of strategic convergence between the two nations on the rise of China.

Issues for Congress

The border standoff at Doka La marks a shift in China-India ties that likely has more to do with the broader relationship than with the Himalayan border alone. An [intensification of rivalry between China and India appears to be under way](#). For New Delhi, China's efforts to [block India from membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group](#), develop the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through a part of Kashmir claimed by India, [protect a Pakistan-based terrorist from UN](#) sanctions, and develop China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean littoral have combined to increase New Delhi's frustration with and suspicion of China. China has been wary of India's decisions to not attend China's Belt and Road summit in May 2017, allow the Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh, and continue to develop strategic ties with the United States. Given these larger dynamics, as well as specific statements and posturing on Doka La, it may be some time before the dispute is fully resolved.

Author Information

Bruce Vaughn
Specialist in Asian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.